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ABSTRACT

Some authorities wish to persuasively define rhetoric as formal or public speeches, while others hold to a more traditional and broader definition pointing to the relevance of speech-act theory to support them. Central to speech-act theory is the illocutionary act (uttering at least one sentence of some language under certain conditions). Two effects are associated with each illocutionary act: an illocutionary effect is the reader's or listener's understanding or interpreting the illocutionary act, and the perlocutionary effect is a chain of effects dependent on the illocutionary effect. The problem of all communicators, not simply formal speech makers, is to speak or write clearly (illocutionary effectiveness) and to get people to believe their statements, answer their questions, and obey their commands (perlocutionary effectiveness). (TJ)

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SPEECH ACTS AND RHETORICAL ACTION

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Forty years ago, in an article in Mind, the philosopher Charles L. Stevenson both described and baptized a verbal maneuver that, though ancient, had not, I believe, ever before been described: the persuasive definition. Let me quote Stevenson's description, as he gave it some years later in his book Ethics and Language (1944):

> In any "persuasive definition" the term defined is a familiar one, whose meaning is both descriptive and strongly emotive. The purport of the definition is to alter the descriptive meaning of the term, usually by giving it greater precision within the boundaries of its customary vagueness; but the definition does not make any substantial change in the term's emotive meaning. And the definition is used, consciously or unconsciously, in an effort to secure, by this interplay between emotive and descriptive meaning, a redirection of people's attitudes [p. 210].

As an example of a persuasive definition, Stevenson cites Socrates' definition of justice (or justice of the state) in the fourth book of the Republic: "Justice of the state," Socrates says, "consists of each of the three classes doing the work of its own class" (pp. 224-25). Stevenson's comment upon Socrates' definition of justice is instructive:

> The persuasive character of this definition--the fact that it forms a part of a spirited plea for a class system, a beautiful and moving appeal for a special kind of aristocracy--can scarcely be denied. The usual meanings of "justice" must give place to the "true" one, to the meaning which needs the dignity of a laudatory name [p. 225].

Recently I have ventured to add persuasive definition to the list of informal fallacies familiar to us all: argument to the man, begging the question, composition, equivocation, and so on. I call it the fallacy of persuasive definition. I might, with justice, have called it the Platonic fallacy. I describe it, in part, as follows:

> Persuasive definition is the fallacy of disguising a definition of a word as an argument for approving or disapproving of the things that the word defined--as defined---can refer to [Words in Action (1979), p. 260].

Persuasive definition is fallacious, I go on to say, because "It tries to persuade readers to approve [or disapprove] of something. . . without giving them any reasons for doing so. It is, in effect, a conclusion without premises" (p. 261).

I begin with this account of persuasive definition because, if I am right in characterizing it as a fallacy, it is a fallacy to which discussions of rhetoric are easily prone and I want to avoid it in my remarks about rhetoric. The term rhetoric is--at least in speech-communication cirles--"strongly emotive"; it

is "a laudatory name." The term is also notoriously vague and ambiguous. All in all, it is an ideal candidate for persuasive definition. And so with terms derived from the term rhetoric.

Karl R. Wallace, for example, in Understanding Discourse: The Speech Act and Rhetorical Action (1970), succumbs, I believe, to the temptation to define both the term rhetoric and the term rhetorical action persuasively. The true ends of rhetoric are not, he writes,

> vague ones . . . such as to communicate, to persuade, to convince, to inform, to explain, to describe, to narrate, to please, in writing and speaking--or, of all things, to speak and write correctly. These ends--if indeed they can properly be called ends--are imprecise and unsubstantial. It is more illuminating to say that the purposes of discourse are to communicate something, to persuade or convince about something, to explain something, and the like. It is good to say that the function of rhetoric is that of adjusting people to ideas and ideas to people [p. 108].

And he persuasively defines rhetorical action in such a way that only formal, or public, speeches are rhetorical actions--that "everyday acts of speech" are not rhetorical actions (p. 72); nor, presumably, are acts of writing. "Our conclusion, then, is," he writes, "this: The materials--the meaning--of rhetorical actions are such as have been indicated. Rhetoric is the theory of such actions; that is, it seeks to explain how speeches are made and how they function" (p. 108).

These definitions of rhetoric and rhetorical action--this restriction of the scope of rhetorical research and rhetorical theory to formal speeches--I reject. For one thing, Professor Wallace gives me no reasons for accepting, or approving of, this restriction. For another thing--and more importantly--I have reasons for not accepting it, reasons that will surface as I outline the relevance of speech-act theory to rhetorical research and rhetorical theory.

Let me begin this outline with an analogy--not original but, for all that, illuminating. The analogy is between playing chess and performing speech acts. When playing chess, we can--simultaneously, of course--do two different things; and, to do these two things, we must have two different kinds of knowledge. One thing we can do is simply to follow the rules of chess, simply to play the game. To do this, we need know nothing but these rules. The other thing we can do is to play the game well, to be a grand master or at least to win more games than we lose. To do this, however, we must have additional knowlege of a quite different kind. We must have knowledge of the laws of successful chess playing, knowledge of those strategies that, followed, usually or often result in victory. There is a great difference between books entitled How to Play Chess and those entitled How to Win at Chess. This difference corresponds to the difference between correctness (following the rules) and effectiveness (winning games). Analogously, there is a great difference between books entitled How to Speak English and books entitled How to Get Your

Message Across and Influence People by Speaking English. This difference, too, corresponds to the difference between correctness (following the grammatical rules of English) and effectiveness (having the desired effects upon readers or listeners). Pace Professor Wallace, we might call books of the first kind grammars and books of the second rhetorics.

This difference between correctness and effectiveness speech-act theory captures very well and, capturing it, suggests two kinds of research into the rhetorical dimension of all speech acts--everyday speech acts as well as formal speeches, and written speech acts as well as oral.

The central concept or notion of speech-act theory--as proposed by the late J. L. Austin (How to Do Things with Words, 1962) and developed by J. R. Searle (Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language, 1969)--is the illocutionary act. To perform an illocutionary act is to do such a thing as making a statement, asking a question, or issuing a command. In each instance, an illocutionary act consists of uttering at least one sentence of some language under certain conditions. Consider the following sentence, from Samuel Johnson's preface to his A Dictionary of the English Language (1755):

To make dictionaries is dull work.

Johnson's utterance of this statement counts as an illocutionary act--specifically, the illocutionary act of making a statement--if and only if Johnson uttered it under certain conditions. He must, for example have believed, and have had reason to believe,

that making dictionaries is indeed dull work; and he must have believed that this proposition would be news to his readers. To the extent that Johnson's utterance did not satisfy these conditions, it is defective. Should it turn out, for instance, that he really believed that making dictionaries is fascinating work, that would be a very grave defect. Illocutionary acts are both constituted and regulated by rules.

What is a rule? In the sense that I wish to use the term rule, a rule is a human decision or agreement or mandate--perhaps tacit and unconscious like a social contract--to perform under certain conditions in a certain way in order to enjoy a benefit or avoid a penalty. Some rules are both constitutive and regulative. The rules of chess are an example. Without these rules, chess-playing is a logical impossibility. Chess is the rules of chess. No rules, no game. And, of course, these rules regulate the moves that chess-players make. Some other rules are merely regulative. The ordinances regulating the preparation of food in restaurants are an example. Food-preparation is logically independent of these rules. Restaurants could, and for centuries did, prepare food in the absence of these rules.

In this sense of rule, a rule must be distinguished from both a recipe and a law. A recipe is a formula for the performance of a certain kind of act; it uniquely determines every feature of that act. But a rule only constrains the performance of an act. As Professor Wallace correctly observes, "making a speech is not the same kind of action as making a pie . . ." (p. 98). And

speech-making is creative in a way that pie-making is not. Every sentence of a speech may be, and usually is, as he points out, unique (p. 65); precisely those words in precisely that order have never before been uttered in the history of the language. When beginning an unmemorized or unwritten speech, moreover, a speaker never knows just what shape it will take; making a speech consists of deciding--sentence by sentence--just what its shape is to be. Nor is a rule a law. A law is not a human decision or agreement or mandate; it is simply a general fact; a regularity of performance, human or otherwise; under certain conditions, occurrences of a certain kind. If someone taps the tendon below your kneecap, and you have a normal kneecap, you lift your leg: the patellar reflex. This is a law, not a rule. People have not agreed to lift their legs when someone taps this tendon; they just do.

Illocutionary acts are constituted and regulated by three sets of rules, and successful performance of illocutionary acts presupposes speakers' or writers' knowledge of these rules. First, the grammatical rules of the language--the syntactic, the phonological, and the semantic rules of the language--regulate the sentences uttered in the performance of illocutionary acts. They specify the syntactic and the phonetic form of each sentence and its meaning or meanings. Second, illocutionary-act rules specify the conditions that utterance of a sentence must satisfy if it is to count as an illocutionary act of a certain type--statement-making, for example, or question-asking or command-issuing.

Third, genre rules constrain the operation of grammatical and illocutionary-act rules. The genre rules that constitute and regulate Italian sonnets, for instance, constrain the operation of grammatical rules. They do not allow all sequences of sentences allowable by these rules but only sequences with certain syntactic, phonetic, and semantic features. An Italian sonnet must consist of exactly fourteen iambic-pentameter lines riming according to one of a restricted range of rime schemes, and it must have some sort of semantic contrast between the octave and the sestet. The genre rules of formal-speech-making--how they constrain illocutionary-act rules--are the focus of Professor Wallace's book.

Correlated with every illocutionary act--with every specific instance or token, not with every type of act--are two effects of different kinds: an illocutionary effect and a perlocutionary effect. (I apologize for the jargon--illocutionary and perlocutionary--but it comes with the speech-act territory.) An illocutionary effect is simply readers' or listeners' understanding, or interpreting, the corresponding illocutionary act: inferring what statement has been made, for instance, or what question has been asked or what command has been issued. A perlocutionary effect is an effect or chain of effects dependent upon and following the illocutionary effect: believing or disbelieving a statement or not knowing what to believe; answering a question yes, no, or not at all; obeying or disobeying a command.

Unlike illocutionary acts, illocutionary effects and perlocutionary effects are neither constituted nor regulated by rules. There seem, however, to be laws that causally relate illocutionary

acts to illocutionary effects and to perlocutionary effects; and some speakers and writers seem to have knowledge of some of them. To preserve our jargon, let's call these laws illocutionary-effectiveness laws and perlocutionary-effectiveness laws, respectively.

One problem that all speakers and writers have is to communicate their messages to listeners and readers. In traditional rhetorical terms, this is the problem of speaking or writing clearly. In speech-act terms, it is the problem of achieving illocutionary effectiveness. The measure of illocutionary effectiveness is ease of understanding, or interpretation. The easier an illocutionary act is to understand, the greater its illocutionary effectiveness. Speakers and writers who are illocutionarily effective--who speak or write clearly--presumably know some illocutionary-effectiveness laws and use their knowledge to guide their performance. Like knowledge of grammatical, illocutionary-act, and genre rules, this knowledge is almost surely knowing-how knowledge (implicit, unformulated, practical knowledge) rather than knowing-that knowledge (explicit, formulated, theoretical knowledge).

The other problem that all speakers and writers have is, by communicating their messages, to influence listeners and readers--get them to believe their statements, to answer their questions, obey their commands. In traditional rhetorical terms, this is the problem of speaking or writing convincingly or persuasively. In speech-act terms, it is the problem of achieving perlocutionary

effectiveness. The measure of perlocutionary effectiveness is achievement of the perlocutionary effect that the speaker or the writer intends. Speakers and writers who are perlocutionarily effective--who speak or write convincingly or persuasively--presumably know some perlocutionary-effectiveness laws and use their knowledge to guide their performance. Again: knowing-how rather than knowing-that knowledge.

Why, then, do I reject Professor Wallace's persuasive definitions of rhetoric and rhetorical action? Because speech-act theory confirms the traditional view that there is a difference between correctness (following the rules) and effectiveness (having the desired effects upon listeners or readers), that there are two kinds of effectiveness (illocutionary and perlocutionary), and that speakers and writers in all genres, not just in formal speeches, share the problems of achieving both illocutionary and perlocutionary effectiveness. Probably some illocutionary-effectiveness laws and some perlocutionary-effectiveness laws are genre-specific; but many, perhaps nearly all, may well be common to all genres.

In closing, let me observe that, in my view, speech-act theory is not in itself a product of rhetorical research. Rather it points the way for rhetorical research in two kinds of effectiveness. The product of this research will be a theory of rhetorical competence--that is, a theory of what rhetors must know in order to perform in the ways they do: grammatical, illocutionary-act, and genre rules and illocutionary-effectiveness and perlocutionary-effectiveness laws. Such a theory will make explicit--formulate--

the implicit knowing-how knowledge of speakers and writers. This theory will not, I hasten to add, be all of rhetorical theory. It won't, for instance, be a theory of rhetorical performance; it won't say a word about what rhetors do--about what goes on psychologically, neurologically, and physiologically when they acquire or exercise their rhetorical competence (about invention, say). Nor will it be a pedagogical theory--a theory of how to acquire rhetorical competence through formal instruction. But a theory of rhetorical performance must presuppose--indeed, must incorporate--a theory of rhetorical competence; and a pedagogical theory must presuppose both.